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U.S. strategic recalibration toward Vietnam under the Nixon Doctrine (1969-1973)

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ABSTRACT

The promulgation of the Nixon Doctrine in 1969 marked a critical turning point in the evolution of U.S. foreign policy and fundamentally reshaped Washington's approach to the Vietnam War. This article employs historical analysis and logical reasoning to examine the strategic recalibration of U.S. policy toward Vietnam under the influence of the Nixon Doctrine during the period 1969-1973. The findings indicate that this recalibration was implemented along two principal tracks: the military dimension, through the adoption of the Vietnamization strategy, and the diplomatic dimension, through the leveraging of relations with the Soviet Union and China in parallel with negotiations with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in Paris. The ultimate objectives of this strategy were twofold: (1) the withdrawal of all U.S. combat forces and prisoners of war, and (2) the preservation of a viable Republic of Vietnam government. On this basis, the study identifies two major strategic adjustments in U.S. policy under the Nixon administration: first, a military shift from the large-scale direct intervention pursued under the Johnson administration toward the full transfer of combat responsibilities to indigenous forces; and second, a diplomatic reorientation that prioritized national interests and strategic objectives over ideological confrontation with the communist bloc, which had characterized earlier containment policies. Through this analysis, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the transformation of U.S. foreign policy toward Vietnam during President Nixon's first term.

Keywords: U.S. diplomatic strategy; Vietnamization; the Nixon administration; the Vietnam War.

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INTRODUCTION

The victory of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) at Dien Bien Phu over the French Expeditionary Corps and the 1954 Geneva Agreement, set against the broader backdrop of Cold War tensions, elevated Vietnam to a position of strategic importance in United States foreign policy. Washington came to view Vietnam as a critical front in its effort to contain the spread of communism from the Soviet Union, through the People's Republic of China, and into Southeast Asia. Grounded in the Truman Doctrine, the U.S. became progressively more deeply involved in Vietnam, culminating in direct military intervention in South Vietnam in March 1965. This intervention was intended to prevent the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in the face of attacks by the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF) - operating under the direction of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) - and the persistent political and social instability that followed the overthrow of the Ngo Dinh Diem government in the coup of late 1963.

However, the large-scale offensives launched by the NLF in 1968 demonstrated that the U.S. approach to the Vietnam War, rooted in a containment strategy inherited from the Truman administration, was both ineffective and increasingly incompatible with the broader trend toward détente in the Cold War. Amid a changing international environment and a discernible shift within the U.S. Congress and public opinion from idealism toward pragmatism

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in foreign policy, the newly elected President Nixon undertook a comprehensive reassessment of U.S. strategy in both conception and practice.

Beginning with ideas articulated in fragmented form during the 1968 presidential campaign and subsequently outlined at Guam in July 1969, President Nixon formally announced a coherent new strategic framework on November 3, 1969, which came to be known as the Nixon Doctrine. On this basis, the Nixon administration formulated new approaches to the Vietnam question. This study aims to identify the core elements of the U.S. strategic recalibration toward Vietnam under the Nixon Doctrine; to analyze the process by which this strategy was implemented from its public articulation in November 1969 to the achievement of concrete outcomes embodied in the Paris Agreement of January 1973; and to assess the effectiveness of these strategic adjustments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Origins and Core Tenets of the Nixon Doctrine (1969)

1.1. Historical Context of the Nixon Doctrine's Emergence

By the 1960s, the global order had experienced profound changes as the post-Second World War distribution of power began to realign. The intense confrontation between the U.S. and the Soviet Union during the 1940s and 1950s gradually evolved into a period of détente following the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. After a prolonged and costly arms race, the two superpowers increasingly considered limitations on strategic weapons. At the same time, the deepening Sino-Soviet split weakened cohesion within the socialist bloc, thereby reshaping U.S. strategic calculations and expanding its global strategic options. Meanwhile, key allies such as Western Europe and Japan-previously reliant on the U.S. for postwar economic recovery and security-had, through reconstruction and sustained growth, gained greater autonomy in international affairs and emerged as increasingly formidable economic competitors. In Asia, the ongoing process of decolonization further highlighted the growing importance of Third World countries, creating a new strategic environment in which the U.S. could no longer rely on traditional models of large-scale military intervention.

During the 1960s, the U.S. experienced a profound crisis of confidence and political legitimacy on the domestic front. Deepening involvement in the Vietnam War imposed severe strains on the American economy, exacerbated social divisions, and eroded public trust in the federal government. The civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, and the growing public questioning of America's role in the world all signaled widespread dissatisfaction with the global strategy then being pursued. As a result, both public opinion and the U.S. Congress became increasingly reluctant to support the government's foreign policy agenda, particularly in light of the mounting human and material costs of the Vietnam War.

This opposition intensified further as extensive media coverage of the 1968 Tet Offensive underscored the depth of U.S. entanglement and the perception of a strategic stalemate in Vietnam. A Gallup poll[1] conducted in late February 1968 posed the question: "In view of the developments since we entered the fighting in Vietnam, do you think the U.S. made a mistake in sending troops to fight in Vietnam?" The results indicated that 49 percent of respondents agreed, while 41 percent disagreed [8, p.2109]. In this context, the U.S. in the 1960s-particularly during the latter half of the decade-emerged as a deeply divided society, with a growing proportion of the public expressing a clear desire for an end to the war.

This context compelled the Nixon administration to undertake a comprehensive reassessment of its strategy toward Vietnam, aiming to uphold U.S. commitments to the RVN while reducing the disproportionate burden of the war borne by the U.S. under the previous administration, and at the same time to preserve America's status as a leading superpower within an increasingly multipolar international system.

[1] *Gallup surveys* are nationwide public opinion polls conducted in the U.S. Policymakers frequently rely on polling data to gauge public attitudes and to anticipate potential reactions to announced policies. U.S. presidents, in particular, have traditionally attached great importance to opinion surveys because "they see them as a measurement of their success and power" [7, p.25]. This concern becomes especially pronounced as elections approach, when both incumbent presidents and challengers closely monitor public opinion because of its direct impact on electoral outcomes. In this context, public preferences often assume heightened political significance for presidents and presidential candidates alike.

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1.2. The Content of the Nixon Doctrine

In January 1969, a Gallup public opinion survey indicated that the Vietnam War had become the most pressing foreign policy issue confronting the Nixon administration, identified as such by 40 percent of respondents (the second-ranked concern was crime and lawlessness, cited by 17 percent) [8, p.2180]. The RVN remained heavily dependent on U.S. backing for its survival, while the DRV showed no sign of wavering in its determination to defeat both the U.S. and the RVN in pursuit of national reunification. At the same time, support within the U.S. Congress and among the American public for continued U.S. military involvement in the Vietnam War was steadily eroding.

Nixon recognized that any effort to prolong American participation in the conflict would provoke intense criticism and potentially serious political confrontation, thereby constraining his ability to achieve a "peace with honor." Consequently, the abandonment of direct U.S. military intervention in Vietnam-articulated in the policy of Vietnamization[2] in March 1969-became the conceptual foundation for the emergence of the Nixon Doctrine.

On the evening of July 25, 1969, President Nixon, while on the island of Guam, gave a press interview outlining the directions the U.S. intended to pursue in the future. In this interview, Nixon articulated core principles of U.S. foreign policy strategy that were later described by journalists, politicians, and senior officials within his administration as the Guam Doctrine. This moment is widely regarded as the first clear indication that Nixon would pursue a new global strategy during his presidency, aimed primarily at limiting U.S. intervention in conflicts in the Third World in the years ahead.

The principles outlined in the Guam interview were subsequently refined by President Nixon and formally presented in his televised address on the evening of November 3, 1969, widely known as the Silent Majority speech. In this address, the Nixon Doctrine was articulated as comprising three fundamental components:

"First, the U.S. will keep all of its treaty commitments.

Second, we shall provide a shield if a nuclear power threatens the freedom of a nation allied with us or of a nation whose survival we consider vital to our security.

Third, in cases involving other types of aggression, we shall furnish military and economic assistance when requested in accordance with our treaty commitments. But we shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense." [17, pp.905-906].

The Nixon Doctrine established the fundamental principles guiding U.S. foreign policy during the Nixon presidency. Under this doctrine, the U.S. sought to uphold its commitments to allies while simultaneously acknowledging the reality of strategic overextension, which created an increasing mismatch between its global obligations and available domestic resources. Consequently, Washington was compelled to recalibrate its strategic interests to ensure that they served higher priorities related to national security and its overall global position. In this sense, the Nixon Doctrine redefined the patterns of U.S. intervention in international affairs and contributed to significant changes in both the structure and practice of international relations.

2. The Strategic Content of U.S. Policy toward the Vietnam War under the Nixon Doctrine

Richard Nixon had devoted considerable attention to the Vietnam War since his tenure as Vice President under the Eisenhower administration (1953-1961). During the 1968 presidential campaign, Nixon sought to convince voters that he could bring the Vietnam War to an end through what he termed a "peace with honor": "I pledge to you tonight that the first priority foreign policy objective of our next Administration will be to bring an honorable end to the war in Vietnam. We shall not stop there-we need a policy to prevent more Vietnams" [14; p125]. Accordingly, Nixon advocated the transfer of combat responsibilities to indigenous forces, arguing that "I say the time has come for other

[2] The Vietnamization strategy implemented by the U.S. in South Vietnam comprised several interrelated dimensions, including the political sphere (the organization of political institutions and the constitutional framework, as well as the strength of non-communist political forces), the economic sphere (financial and monetary policies and patterns of domestic consumption across different social strata in South Vietnam), and the military sphere. This article therefore confines its analysis exclusively to the military dimension.

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nations in the Free World to bear their fair share of the burden of defending peace and freedom around this world" [14; 128].

At the same time, he emphasized the U.S.' willingness to pursue peace through diplomacy with the Soviet Union and China: "We must always seek opportunities to talk with her, as with the USSR. . . . We must not only watch for changes. We must seek to make changes" [11, p.164]. Together, these positions constituted the conceptual foundations of the strategy that the Nixon administration would later implement in addressing the Vietnam War.

The aforementioned views of Richard Nixon were further refined into a coherent and systematic strategy, later articulated as the Nixon Doctrine. In his address formally articulating the Nixon Doctrine on November 3, 1969, Nixon outlined his approach to resolving the Vietnam War as follows: "we can persist in our search for a just peace through a negotiated settlement if possible, or through continued implementation of our plan for Vietnamization if necessary-a plan in which we will withdraw all of our forces from Vietnam on a schedule in accordance with our program, as the South Vietnamese become strong enough to defend their own freedom" [17, p.907]. This statement highlights two principal components of the Nixon administration's strategy toward Vietnam, expressed in both the military and diplomatic spheres: (1) the implementation of the Vietnamization strategy; and (2) the pursuit of negotiations.

Implementation of the Vietnamization strategy: The U.S. would gradually withdraw its troops while simultaneously expanding the equipping and training of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), with the aim of enabling these forces to progressively assume primary responsibility for direct combat operations against communist forces in the Vietnam War.

Pursuit of negotiations: The Nixon administration pursued this objective through two interrelated measures: (1) the resumption of negotiations with the DRV in Paris, which had begun during the final months of the Johnson administration in 1968; and (2) the application of the linkage strategy and triangular diplomacy in managing relations with the Soviet Union and China-the two most important external supporters of the DRV-in order to exert indirect pressure on Hanoi and induce it to accept U.S. terms in the Paris negotiations.

Together, these two approaches constituted the principal methods employed by President Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger throughout the first term of the Nixon administration (1969-1973).

3. The Implementation of the Nixon Administration's Strategy for Resolving the Vietnam War (1969-1973)

3.1. The Implementation of the Vietnamization Strategy

At the National Security Council meeting on March 28, 1969, the Vietnamization strategy was formally adopted, with its central objective defined as "to turn over the fighting to the South Vietnamese," namely, transferring combat responsibilities to the ARVN through enhanced training and military assistance[3] [22, pp.169-170]. Thereafter, the Nixon administration initiated a plan for the gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces, implemented in parallel with expanded efforts to equip and train the ARVN.

On May 14, 1969, Nixon publicly announced his policy for resolving the Vietnam War, commonly known as the Eight-Point Plan. He declared that the U.S. would withdraw its troops according to a timetable, provided that the DRV likewise withdrew its forces from South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. This plan also provided the framework for Henry Kissinger's negotiating approach with representatives of the DRV in Paris during the early years of the talks.

[3] In fact, the strategy of de-Americanizing the Vietnam War can be traced to the Comprehensive Plan for South Vietnam formulated in 1963 and subsequently pursued under the Johnson administration in 1967 and 1968, albeit without a concrete timetable for implementation. Beginning in July 1968, the U.S. Military Assistance Command, in coordination with the Pacific Command, developed the T-Day plan for the withdrawal of U.S. forces in the context of a ceasefire and a parallel withdrawal alongside the People's Army of Vietnam. This plan envisaged a phased troop withdrawal over a period of six or twelve months, leaving approximately 100,000 personnel in place to continue supporting the ARVN [5, pp.144–145]. Throughout the discussion and formulation of this plan, no party-including the Military Assistance Command in Vietnam-gave serious consideration to the possibility of a unilateral U.S. withdrawal.

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Shortly thereafter, on June 8, 1969, during a meeting with President Nguyen Van Thieu at Midway Island, President Nixon publicly announced for the first time the withdrawal of approximately 25,000 U.S. troops, to be completed by the end of August [22, p.443]. He emphasized, however, that a precise timetable for subsequent withdrawals could not yet be fixed, as it depended on multiple factors and required careful balancing between the pace of U.S. withdrawal and the potential adverse consequences for the RVN. Accordingly, Nixon and his advisers adopted a flexible, conditions-based approach to troop withdrawals rather than a rigid, fixed schedule.

By 1970, Nixon concluded that the pace of Vietnamization needed to be accelerated further in order to expedite the withdrawal of U.S. forces. In April 1970, while pursuing efforts to strengthen the ARVN under Phase III of the ARVN Improvement and Modernization Plan, the U.S. decided to launch an offensive against the Central Office for South Vietnam-the headquarters of the NLF -located on Cambodian territory[4]. This operation was intended, on the one hand, to test the ARVN's combat capabilities and, on the other, to protect the ARVN from the risk of attacks by communist forces operating across the border following U.S. troop withdrawals.

From April 29 to June 30, 1970, U.S. forces, together with the ARVN, conducted a large-scale incursion into Cambodia. Although the Nixon administration portrayed the Cambodian operation as a success, it provoked intense backlash in the U.S. Congress[5] and among the American public, fueling doubts about the administration's commitment to troop withdrawals and its peace plan. The antiwar movement, which had previously subsided, resurged forcefully in response to the U.S. military action in Cambodia.

By the end of 1970, negotiations with the DRV in Paris had shown no signs of a breakthrough, while the antiwar movement within the U.S. continued to intensify. These developments placed mounting pressure on the Nixon administration, compelling it to seek more decisive measures to overcome the impasse. At the same time, the administration recognized that the 1970 incursion into Cambodia had failed to eliminate all of the DRV's logistical bases outside North Vietnam. As a result, the Ho Chi Minh Trail remained the principal infiltration route for the PAVN into South Vietnam.

Against this backdrop, in February 1971 the Nixon administration decided to launch a large-scale military operation into Laotian territory. This strategy was intended not only to sever communist supply lines but also to form part of a broader U.S. effort to weaken communist forces in South Vietnam. Washington understood that as long as the DRV retained its capacity to reinforce its forces, communist operations in the South would continue, thereby undermining the Army of the Republic of Vietnam's war effort and threatening the survival of the RVN in the event of major offensives following U.S. withdrawal.

This operation, known as Operation Lam Son 719, was described by Nixon as "a critical test of Vietnamization" [16, p.136]. In this campaign, the ARVN assumed full responsibility for combat operations, while U.S. forces were confined to advisory and logistical roles. However, the ARVN failed to achieve its objectives. The operation "was a major setback for the arvn that exposed its limitations in planning and executing complicated military operations and highlighted Thieu's lack of resolve in critical situations" [21, p.225].

The outcome demonstrated that although the ARVN had, by this stage, significantly expanded in manpower and equipment, its capacity for independent combat operations remained limited and heavily dependent on U.S. support, particularly in air power and logistics. Consequently, Vietnamization failed to produce an effective fighting force capable of sustaining the war effort as U.S. assistance was progressively reduced. In this respect, U.S. military strategy in 1971 functioned as a practical test of the Vietnamization model, revealing a pronounced mismatch between strategic expectations and the ARVN's actual capabilities-thereby rendering the objectives of a secure U.S. withdrawal and long-term stability in South Vietnam increasingly difficult to attain.

[4] Upon assuming office, Nixon was informed by U.S. intelligence that more than 40,000 troops of Vietnamese communist forces had secretly concentrated in areas approximately 10 to 15 miles inside the Cambodian border. By the end of April 1970, communist forces had come to control approximately one quarter of Cambodian territory and were advancing toward the capital, Phnom Penh [15, pp.381, 448]. Meanwhile, the port of Sihanoukville had emerged as a critical supply hub for the DRV in supporting communist forces operating in Cambodia.
[5] In response to Nixon's expansion of the war, Congress moved to assert its authority more forcefully. On December 31, 1970, Congress repealed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, a decision that marked a significant curtailment of presidential authority to expand the war in Indochina.

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By early 1972, the U.S. war effort in Vietnam had reached a stalemate on all fronts, while the Paris negotiations made no tangible progress. Infiltration by the PAVN into South Vietnam persisted unabated, even as U.S. troop withdrawals continued. Under mounting political pressure from Congress, American public opinion, and Nixon's reelection campaign, the Nixon administration further accelerated troop withdrawals and prioritized the repatriation of U.S. prisoners of war. On the morning of January 13, 1972, Nixon announced that an additional 70,000 U.S. troops would be withdrawn from Vietnam over the following three months, reducing the total number of U.S. personnel in Vietnam to 69,000 by May 1 [19, p.30].

In late March 1972, the PAVN launched a large-scale offensive into South Vietnam, placing the ARVNon the brink of serious defeat and posing a direct threat to the survival of the RVN. In this context, in mid-April 1972 the U.S. initiated *Operation Linebacker I*, which focused on air strikes against key ports and strategic transportation networks of the DRV. This campaign was designed both to intensify diplomatic pressure in the Paris negotiations and to create more favorable military conditions for the ARVN.

By May 1972, the U.S. had terminated ground combat operations and implemented the *Enhance* and subsequently *Enhance Plus* programs to supply military equipment to the ARVN. These efforts have been widely regarded as "the last-ditch effort to modernize the RVNAF before restrictions were imposed by the Paris treaty" [10, p.349].

After securing reelection in November 1972, Nixon became even more determined to accelerate a definitive settlement of the Vietnam War. However, the strategic environment at that time remained deeply unfavorable: President Nguyen Van Thieu vehemently opposed the draft agreement, while the DRV continued to adhere to an uncompromising negotiating position. As a result, the Paris negotiations once again descended into deadlock.

Accordingly, on December 17, 1972, Nixon ordered a massive bombing campaign against North Vietnam-commonly known as the Christmas Bombing or Operation Linebacker II-conducted over twelve days and nights (from December 18 to 29) and targeting Hanoi, Haiphong, and surrounding areas. This marked the most intense escalation of U.S. military action since 1965. The objective of the bombing campaign was to "convince the South that the U.S. would not allow the Saigon regime to be overthrown and to reaffirm that the secret commitments to protect the separate existence of South Vietnam made in letters between Nixon and Pres. Nguyen Van Thieu would be honored" [3, p.39].

At the same time, the campaign was intended to demonstrate to the RVN that the U.S. remained prepared to act decisively to protect its ally, while implicitly signaling to the DRV that any violation of a peace agreement would be met with force. Moreover, the operation also served to pressure President Thieu to accept the agreement, with the implicit warning that the U.S. would proceed even without his consent. Although the bombing campaign outwardly reflected the toughness associated with Nixon's "madman theory," it was, in essence, an expression of strategic frustration in response to a prolonged and seemingly intractable stalemate. Nevertheless, the operation succeeded in bringing the DRV back to the negotiating table and in compelling Thieu to acquiesce under U.S. pressure.

Thus, as a result of Vietnamization, between July 1969 and November 1972 the U.S. carried out a total of fourteen troop withdrawal phases, reducing its force levels from 549,500 personnel at the time Richard Nixon assumed the presidency in January 1969 to only 27,400 by the end of 1972, by which point the U.S. had virtually no combat forces remaining in Vietnam [13, p.166]. Correspondingly, the strength of the ARVN expanded substantially, encompassing both regular and local forces, and increased from approximately 700,000 troops in 1968 to about 1.1 million by 1972 [13, p.174].

Viewed within the historical context of the period, the emergence of Vietnamization was therefore a strategic necessity shaped by mounting domestic and international constraints. U.S. troop withdrawals reduced direct American combat involvement and limited further escalation, thereby lowering U.S. casualties and contributing to reductions in war-related expenditures. During this process, remaining U.S. forces continued to assist in the modernization and professionalization of the ARVN, enabling it to assume primary responsibility for the conduct of the war. In parallel, the U.S. supported the RVN government in pursuing economic development and reform, strengthening rural governance, and enhancing administrative capacity.

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At the same time, the strategy facilitated what Henry Kissinger later termed a "decent interval"-a transitional period during which the RVN could survive following U.S. withdrawal before its eventual collapse. Finally, Vietnamization produced several favorable shifts in both domestic and foreign political conditions for the U.S.. Announcements of phased troop withdrawals helped to ease domestic antiwar pressures and weakened criticisms that the Nixon administration was perpetuating a costly and stagnant conflict. Moreover, Vietnamization was intended to reassure U.S. allies that Washington was not abandoning its international commitments, but rather continuing to uphold them through sustained military and economic support for the RVN government while hostilities persisted.

3.2. U.S. Diplomatic Strategy toward the Soviet Union, China, and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam

a. Leveraging Relations with the Soviet Union and China

The diplomatic strategy adopted by the Nixon administration in its relations with the Soviet Union-and later with China-centered on *linkage*, defined as "linking cooperation in one area to progress in another" [12, p.714]. The fundamental premise of this strategy rested on a balance of interests and mutual benefit, which Richard Nixon described as the "principle of true reciprocity," a central pillar of overall U.S. foreign policy [18, p.162].

From the outset of his presidency, Nixon prioritized improving relations with the Soviet Union as a core element of his diplomatic strategy. Beginning in February 1969, the U.S. initiated secret negotiations with Moscow through the Soviet ambassador in Washington, Anatoly F. Dobrynin. In its dealings with Moscow, Washington linked issues of strategic arms control-of paramount concern to the Soviet leadership-to bargaining over Vietnam and the Middle East. At this early stage, China remained a secondary diplomatic consideration in the Nixon administration's strategy. U.S. engagement with China during this period was primarily intended to generate leverage for improving relations with, and extracting cooperation from, the Soviet Union.

Shortly after the outbreak of Sino-Soviet military clashes in April 1969, the Nixon administration intensified contacts with the Soviet Union, beginning with a visit by Deputy Secretary of State Cyrus Vance to Moscow to negotiate issues related to strategic weapons and Vietnam. This U.S. initiative, however, failed to yield tangible results. Consequently, in July 1969, Washington shifted its focus toward China as the Sino-Soviet split deepened. For its part, China during this period also began to recalibrate its foreign policy, moving away from an emphasis on ideological struggle toward the pursuit of national security. This shift stemmed not only from tensions with the Soviet Union but also from a range of other factors, including the need to concentrate on domestic issues amid the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution; concerns over improving U.S-Soviet relations; and growing strains in Sino-North Vietnamese relations as the DRV increasingly gravitated toward the Soviet Union.

By 1970, U.S.-Soviet relations had shown little progress. The Soviet Union's most significant contribution to U.S. strategy was largely confined to serving as an intermediary for transmitting messages between the U.S. and the DRV. A similar pattern characterized U.S.-China relations in early 1970, particularly in the aftermath of the U.S. military incursion into Cambodia (April-June 1970). U.S.-China relations began to improve only from July onward, when the two countries initiated the restoration of high-level diplomatic contacts.

By early 1971, as the 1972 U.S. presidential election approached, Richard Nixon became increasingly eager to achieve a breakthrough in improving relations with either the Soviet Union or China. The Soviet response, however, proved disappointing, as Moscow repeatedly delayed the convening of a U.S.-Soviet summit in an effort to extract concessions from Washington on the Berlin issue. Consequently, by mid-1971, U.S.-Soviet relations remained stagnant. In this context, the U.S. decided to intensify its engagement with China. Anatoly F. Dobrynin later acknowledged in his memoirs that "Nixon was making it clear that he was ready for a Soviet-American summit in 1971-even before his trip to China," yet "something we were of course unaware of at that time and did not in the least expect" [6, p.222].

In contrast to the inertia in U.S.-Soviet relations, U.S.-China relations entered a new phase. The so-called "ping-pong diplomacy" of April 1971 paved the way for Henry Kissinger's visit to Beijing. During his two trips to China in July and October 1971, Kissinger conveyed Washington's willingness to make greater concessions on the Taiwan issue in exchange for Chinese assistance in exerting pressure on the DRV. Although China publicly rejected the U.S. proposal,

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it nonetheless adjusted its policy toward Hanoi by encouraging negotiations with the U.S. to bring the Vietnam War to an end-marking a clear departure from its earlier stance of obstructing talks, as in late 1968 when the Paris peace negotiations first began.

The year 1972 represented a major turning point in U.S. triangular diplomacy with the signing of the Shanghai Communiqué with China on February 27 and the U.S.-Soviet Joint Communiqué with the Soviet Union on May 29. During this year, the U.S. pursued a policy of diplomatic "balancing" toward both Moscow and Beijing-engaging one while reassuring the other, and vice versa. The most tangible outcome of this strategy was the relatively restrained response of both capitals to the Linebacker I and Linebacker II bombing campaigns against the DRV, which constituted a significant escalation of the war by the U.S..

With regard to the Soviet Union, although it continued to provide assistance to the DRV, it exercised restraint at a level that did not jeopardize the ongoing improvement in U.S.-Soviet relations. Despite the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam during Operation Linebacker I, the Soviet leadership proceeded with plans for a summit, reasoning that "the alternative would amount to handing Hanoi a veto over our relations with America" [6, p.253]. When Operation Linebacker II was launched in December 1972, neither the Soviet Union nor China mounted any significant reaction. As Henry Kissinger observed, "So far, the Chinese reaction has been very mild. The Soviet reaction has been very mild" [24, p.780].

These responses demonstrate that although both the Soviet Union and China publicly supported the DRV in its struggle against the U.S., they consistently exercised restraint in order to avoid undermining their respective strategic relationships with Washington.

b. Negotiations with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in Paris

On January 2, 1969, before officially assuming office, Richard Nixon sent a message to the DRV expressing his willingness to negotiate in pursuit of a peaceful settlement to the Vietnam War. The central objective of the Nixon administration was to terminate direct U.S. military involvement while preserving American honor and international credibility. This objective was to be achieved through a strategy that combined Vietnamization with negotiations, prioritizing troop withdrawals and the return of U.S. prisoners of war. At the same time, a non-negotiable condition for Washington was the continued existence of the Nguyen Van Thieu government. This position stemmed from the recognition that troop withdrawals unaccompanied by a corresponding political settlement would lead to the rapid collapse of the RVN: "As far as I was concerned, almost everything involving a Vietnam settlement was negotiable except two things: I would not agree to anything

that did not include the return of all our POWs and an accounting for our missing in action; and I would not agree to any terms that required or amounted to our overthrow of President Thieu" [15, p.348].

In addition, the U.S. refused to link bilateral troop withdrawals to the future internal political structure of South Vietnam, thereby deliberately separating military issues from political arrangements. Nixon argued that "we were neither qualified, nor justified, in detailing specific political formulas such as governmental bodies or electoral processes for the Vietnamese people," and further emphasized that the U.S. "nor did we wish to be directly involved in-or responsible for-the functioning of the political machinery" [20, p.382]. This approach was consistently applied by Kissinger throughout the subsequent negotiations with the DRV.

On January 25, 1969, the first four-party negotiating session convened in Paris, involving the U.S., the DRV[6], the RVN, and the NLF[7]. From early 1969 to mid-1970, the public negotiations between the U.S. and the DRV produced

[6] During this period, the DRV adjusted its strategic orientation by placing greater emphasis on the diplomatic front under the principle of "fighting while negotiating." This shift was based on the assessment that "the Paris forum is a highly effective platform for us to intensify propaganda among the American people and the peoples of Western countries. Our delegation in Paris has forcefully demonstrated the just cause and the inevitable victory of our people's struggle against the United States to save the nation. The Paris forum has brought us major victories on the front of public opinion" [4, p.82].
[7] From June 10, 1969, the NLF was replaced by the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam (PRG).

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no substantive progress, even as the two sides initiated secret talks on February 21, 1970, involving National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger and the head of the DRV delegation, Xuan Thuy, together with Special Advisor Le Duc Tho.

Throughout this period, the DRV remained steadfast in a negotiating position centered on three principal objectives: (1) compelling the U.S. and its allies to withdraw all forces from South Vietnam; (2) dismantling the RVN government; and (3) consolidating and expanding revolutionary forces in South Vietnam. Taken together, these aims reflected the DRV's overarching objective of securing a complete U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam and overthrowing the Nguyen Van Thieu government.

In this context, on May 31, 1971, during a secret meeting in Paris with Xuan Thuy and Le Duc Tho, H. Kissinger informed them that the U.S. was prepared to set a deadline for the complete withdrawal of its forces from South Vietnam, provided that the release of prisoners of war[8] was completed at least two months prior to the final U.S. troop withdrawal. Kissinger emphasized to Tho that this constituted a major U.S. concession: "Today we have taken a final step toward you" [23, p.654]. This proposal marked a significant shift in the U.S. negotiating position, as Washington had previously never agreed to tolerate the continued presence of the PAVN in South Vietnam. Nevertheless, the DRV representatives rejected the offer, insisting on the removal of Thieu. As a result, the negotiations once again fell into stalemate.

In 1972, the Nixon administration maintained the approach adopted in 1971, focusing on accelerating troop withdrawals and the repatriation of U.S. prisoners of war. This approach reflected mounting pressure from Congress, American public opinion, and Nixon's reelection campaign. On July 19, following the disruption caused by the U.S. Linebacker I bombing campaign, secret negotiations between the U.S. and the DRV were resumed.

A new element in Kissinger's proposal during this meeting was the U.S. willingness to undertake a unilateral troop withdrawal without requiring a corresponding withdrawal by the People's Army of Vietnam. Whereas in the May 31, 1971 talks the U.S. had accepted a ceasefire in place and the temporary presence of the PAVN in South Vietnam, the July 1972 proposal went further by permitting those forces to remain in South Vietnam indefinitely [2, p.57]. This constituted another major concession, made without consultation with-or prior notification to-Thieu[9]. Nevertheless, the negotiations once again failed to produce a breakthrough and remained deadlocked.

In the negotiations of October 8, 1972, the U.S. and the DRV reached a draft agreement for the first time. The key provisions of the DRV's draft included an immediate ceasefire throughout Vietnam, the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces, and the release of all U.S. prisoners of war within sixty days. From the U.S. side, Kissinger explained: "We have not asked for the withdrawal of all your forces. We have said that on the day of ceasefire there be an exchange of [lists of] 7 the units that are in place in each area, which is required in any event. We would hope that such a listing on your side would show that some of the units that have entered South Vietnam after March 25 had returned to North Vietnam. Of course it would also mean that some of your units remain in South Vietnam" [24, p.20].

Under this proposal, the U.S. required only the withdrawal of PAVN units that had entered South Vietnam after the Spring-Summer Offensive of 1972, thereby openly accepting the prior presence of those forces in the South-rather than merely and ambiguously tolerating it, as had been the case in the May 31, 1971 negotiations. In the same round of talks, the DRV for the first time agreed to separate military issues from political ones and no longer insisted on the overthrow of the Thieu government as a precondition. Both Nixon and Kissinger regarded this agreement as exceeding all previous expectations: "It's so far better than anything we discussed" [24, p.122].

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[8] From April to October 1971, congressional resolutions calling for troop withdrawals in exchange for prisoners of war exerted increasing pressure on the Nixon administration. These resolutions demanded that Nixon set a specific withdrawal date and negotiate troop withdrawals in tandem with the release of prisoners [11, p.1018]. In 1971 alone, approximately 22 antiwar congressional resolutions proposed fixed withdrawal deadlines, followed by 35 similar resolutions in 1972 [12, p.689].

[9] The U.S.' secret agreements ran counter to its initial commitments to President Nguyen Van Thieu. In early 1969, when Washington proposed secret negotiations with the DRV, Thieu agreed on the explicit precondition that the PAVN must completely withdraw from South Vietnam, in order to safeguard the South against post-withdrawal attacks. He stated unequivocally: "We accept private talks. If they want to bring the NLF, that is OK with us. For us the important issue is the withdrawal of the North Vietnamese army" [25, p.181]. However, Washington's failure to uphold this condition in subsequent secret agreements seriously undermined the confidence of the Republic of Vietnam government, particularly when the draft agreement was presented to Thieu in October 1972.

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According to Kissinger, these shifts in the DRV's position resulted from a convergence of several factors. He cited the U.S. mining of North Vietnamese ports, which significantly curtailed supplies, the expansion of military operations into Cambodia and Laos during 1970-1971 that weakened communist rear areas, and the heavy losses suffered during the Spring-Summer Offensive of 1972. In addition, neither the Soviet Union nor China was prepared to provide decisive backing to the DRV when the U.S. resumed bombing of North Vietnam.

On October 18, 1972, Kissinger traveled to Saigon to brief President Thieu on the terms of the October 8 draft. Thieu reacted with intense anger, viewing the U.S. concessions as violations of earlier U.S. commitments to the RVN. In his assessment, Washington had conceded too much to the DRV, particularly by accepting the continued presence of the PAVN in South Vietnam and by effectively legitimizing the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam.

In an effort to persuade Thieu, on November 14, 1972, Richard Nixon sent a further letter of reassurance, pledging that the U.S. would intervene to protect the RVN should the DRV violate the agreement: "You have my absolute assurance that if Hanoi fails to abide by the terms of this agreement it is my intention to take swift and severe retaliatory action", and "I repeat my personal assurances to you that the U.S. will react very strongly and rapidly to any violation of the agreement"[10] [24, pp.397-398]. Through these assurances, Nixon sought to allay Thieu's concerns by committing the U.S. to act in the event of DRV violations. He aimed to demonstrate that Washington was not abandoning its ally, but would continue to provide critical military backing, at least during the initial period following the agreement.

Ultimately, these developments led to revisions of the draft agreement on November 20, 1972. The DRV, however, contended that the U.S. was retracting provisions that had already been agreed upon and attempting to alter the negotiated terms. As a result, the talks remained inconclusive.

From the perspective of the RVN, Nguyen Van Thieu remained adamantly opposed to signing the agreement. Nixon sent multiple letters that alternated between reassurance and implicit threats. In his final letter, dated January 20, 1973, Nixon informed Thieu that he would meet with Congress the following day and warned: "If you cannot give me a positive answer by then, I shall inform them that I amauthorizing Dr. Kissinger to initial the agreement even without the concurrence of your government. In that case, even if you should decide to join us later, the possibility of continued Congressional assistance will be severely reduced. In that case also I will not be able to put into my January 23 speech the assurances I have indicated to you, because they will not then seem to have been a voluntary act on my part" [24, p.1114].

After a prolonged period of political confrontation that yielded no favorable outcome, Thieu ultimately acquiesced under U.S. pressure and agreed to sign the Paris Peace Agreement.

4. Outcomes of U.S. Strategy toward Vietnam

On January 27, 1973, the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam was signed in Paris, thereby ending direct U.S. military involvement in the Vietnam War.

Under this Agreement, the U.S. achieved two fundamental objectives: (1) the complete withdrawal of all U.S. military forces within sixty days, as stipulated in Chapter II-Cessation of Hostilities; Withdrawal of Troops; and (2) the repatriation of all U.S. prisoners of war within ninety days, as set forth in Chapter III-The Return of Captured Military Personnel and Foreign Civilians, and Captured and Detained Vietnamese Civilian Personnel. The implementation of these provisions was subject to supervision by the bodies specified in Articles 16 to 18 of Chapter VI-The Joint Military Commissions, the International Commission of Control and Supervision, the International Conference. Accordingly, on March 29, 1973, the last U.S. troops departed from Vietnam. All allied forces of the U.S. also withdrew from South Vietnam before the end of March 1973.

[10] In addition, in order to break the negotiating deadlock, the Nixon administration ordered the execution of *Operation Linebacker II*. The campaign was "part of Vietnamization and aimed at convincing Thieu that the agreement made in October, while not perfect, was the best he would get and that he need not fear the United States abandoning him" [9, p.183].

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Nevertheless, the U.S. failed to secure the long-term survival of the RVN. As a result, its ally was left to confront a stronger adversary that was not legally constrained in a meaningful way by the provisions of the Agreement. This strategic failure was manifested in several respects.

First, the Agreement did not guarantee the legal status of the RVN. Not only did it lack any clause affirming the separate sovereignty of the RVN in South Vietnam, but it also failed to recognize a political boundary at the 17th parallel. Article 15(a) explicitly stated that the 17th parallel "is only provisional and not a political or territorial boundary, as provided for in paragraph 6 of the Final Declaration of the 1954 Geneva Conference" [1, p.11].

Second, the Agreement contained no provision requiring the PAVN to withdraw from South Vietnam. As a result, the continued presence of these forces not only exacerbated military tensions in the South but also intensified political and military pressures on the RVN government, thereby undermining its ability to maintain stability and ensure long-term survival amid shifting international commitments and external constraints.

Third, the survival of the RVN depended largely on U.S. financial and material assistance and on Washington's capacity to support the ARVNin repelling offensives by the People's Army of Vietnam. Yet these vital factors rested primarily on personal assurances given by Nixon in his capacity as President of the U.S., rather than on formal, state-to-state commitments. Consequently, such assurances were contingent upon Nixon's personal authority and were never fully realized once his presidential power was eroded by the Watergate crisis beginning in the summer of 1973. Meanwhile, following the withdrawal of U.S. forces and the reduction of American aid, the RVN descended into a deepening socioeconomic crisis, compounded by ineffective governance, social fragmentation, and strategic miscalculations in military planning. These cumulative weaknesses culminated in the regime's rapid collapse when the PAVN launched a major offensive in early 1975.

Thus, the Paris Agreement of 1973-the final outcome of the implementation of U.S. strategy toward Vietnam between 1969 and 1973-functioned less as a genuine peace settlement for South Vietnam and more as a document reflecting Washington's strategic adjustment aimed at terminating its direct involvement in the war. After the U.S. withdrawal, conflict among the Vietnamese parties continued, and the RVN-once regarded by the U.S. as a cornerstone of its anti-communist strategy in Southeast Asia-collapsed little more than two years after the signing of the Agreement.

CONCLUSION

The primary impetus behind the emergence of the Nixon Doctrine lay in the Nixon administration's response to the military stalemate in Vietnam and, more broadly, to the increasingly expansive role assumed by the U.S. in Asia. The withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from Vietnam constituted the first step in a wider process of American retrenchment from regional and global conflicts. This reduction in direct intervention was predicated on the assumption that U.S. allies would assume greater responsibility for their own defense.

Compared with previous administrations, Nixon's strategy toward Vietnam between 1969 and 1973 represented a significant recalibration in both military and diplomatic terms.

On the military front, whereas the Johnson administration had pursued direct U.S. military intervention-gradually escalating American involvement and becoming deeply entangled in the Vietnam War-Nixon, drawing on the Nixon Doctrine, implemented a phased withdrawal of U.S. forces, transferred combat responsibilities to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, and confined the U.S. role primarily to advisory and support functions. This adjustment was not limited to Vietnam alone but reflected a broader strategic reorientation, whereby foreign commitments were increasingly aligned with domestic capabilities and available resources.

Diplomatically, while earlier administrations from Truman through Johnson had pursued an unconditional containment strategy in regions deemed vulnerable to communist expansion-such as Vietnam-and viewed the Soviet Union and China primarily as adversaries to be confronted, Nixon, in response to changing historical circumstances, shifted toward a strategy of conditional containment. Although preventing the spread of communism remained a core objective, containment was henceforth guided more by national interests than by ideological rigidity. Nixon elevated détente with the Soviet Union to a new phase, as reflected in the Joint Communiqué of May 1972, and laid

the groundwork for the normalization of relations with China, a country with which the U.S. had lacked formal diplomatic relations for more than two decades.

As containment receded from its position as the paramount objective of U.S. foreign policy, Vietnam's salience within American diplomatic strategy correspondingly diminished. Under mounting pressure from Congress and U.S. public opinion, the Nixon administration progressively made concessions in its negotiations with the DRV in Paris, shifting from the Johnson administration's insistence on reciprocal troop withdrawals to a policy of unilateral U.S. withdrawal without requiring corresponding action from Hanoi.

Overall, while this strategic recalibration enabled the U.S. to terminate its direct military involvement in Vietnam in accordance with the Nixon Doctrine, the objective of achieving a "peace with honor" did not materialize as envisioned by the Nixon administration. The collapse of the RVN in 1975 was not solely the result of policies pursued under President Gerald Ford, but rather a longer-term outcome rooted in the strategic choices and structural constraints that had already taken shape during the Nixon presidency.

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